

1946: Hobart adjusts to life after WWII



Stommel's, located where HFS Bank now stands, was Hobart's major department store for over 60 years. This photo was taken in 1947. (Courtesy Hobart Historical Society)

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Relative peace and quiet descended on Hobart 50 years ago, in 1946, in the aftermath of the war. As those who had served in the military began their return to civilian life, engagements and weddings filled the social pages of the *Gazette*, and the first of the baby-boomers made their appearance in the birth announcements.

News came that two more Hobart men, missing in action, would not be coming home -- Lt. Charles B. Koeppen Jr. and Lt. Ralph Worthington. Five other young veterans made it home but were killed when their car collided with a Gary Railways bus at 7th and Lincoln streets. They were Carl Pequignot, Leonard Popp, Constantine Budzielek, Gerald Huml, and Richard Keaton.

Wartime restrictions and post-war problems affected Hobart residents. Sugar was still rationed. Residents were urged to plant Victory Gardens again because the govern-

ment was sending thousands of tons of food to Europe. A bread flour shortage resulted in two breadless days a week at Fred Baumer's bakery. When price controls on meat were lifted in the summer, prices soared, farmers rushed their cattle and hogs to market, and the ensuing meat shortage forced the Office of Price Administration to reinstate price controls.

Early in the year, a steel strike idled 71,700 workers in Lake County and brought a brief boom to grocery stores as families used their last paychecks to stock up on food. The steel strike lasted only a few weeks, but the long-drawn-out United Mine Workers strike under the leadership of John L. Lewis lasted longer. Coal for the generation of electricity for scarce, and "brown-outs" and restrictions on electrical use were ordered several times during the year.

Business Progress

Hobart's business progress was not spectacular, but some changes did occur. Owen

and Jarvis Roper bought out Milton and Frank Brown's interest in the Hobart mill and Roper and Brown feed store. The Ropers in turn sold the mill several months later to the Lake County Farm Bureau. A couple of other businesses changed hands. Lottie Roper and Ethel Robinson bought Smalling's Dress Shop, and the new owners of Countryside Dairy at 661 Main Street and renamed it Melody Lane Dairy.

Mr. and Mrs. John Abbott of Valparaiso opened a new restaurant at 339 Main St. Howard Sykes, also of Valpo, opened a popcorn stand on East Third Street. Sykes was widely known in town as "Popcorn Charlie." The Crystal Roller Rink, housed in a surplus army airplane hangar, opened on State Road 130 south of Cleveland, and NIPSCO bought property on the other side of 130 for a future warehouse and storage facility.

The post-war housing shortage was echoed in the business community. When returning

solidier Cecil price had problems finding a location for his shoeshine parlor, American Legion Post 54 helped him buy an old Hammond streetcar and move it to 423 Main St. Cecil set up business at one end of the car, and he and his wife lived in the other end.

Civic Progress

City fathers had a rude awakening when the estimated cost of the projected sewage plant came in at over \$1,365,000. Mayor Fred Rose Jr. announced that the city would shelve the plan until the state mandated it. Then, he remarked, the state could also tell them how to come up with the money.

The city did install sidewalks on both sides of Wisconsin Street from Ridge Road to Third Street. And Hobart school officials bought five acres of land at Hickey and North Liberty for an elementary school.

The City Council also discussed plans for a Hobart Centennial in 1947. William Earle, city engineer and a descendant of Hobart's founder, George Earle, recommended that although the mill had been built before 1847 and the town was not platted until 1849, 1849 could be considered the founding date since that was the year the post office was established, and the town became nationally recognized.

Clubs and Churches

The Veterans of Foreign Wars was organized with nearly 50 charter members. It was designated the Kostbade-Fowble Post in honor of Edward Kostbade and Edward Fowble, the first Hobart men killed in service in World War I and World War II. The VFW Auxiliary was also organized. The Hobart Aerie, Fraternal Order of the Eagles, also appeared on the scene with about 100 charter members.

The Hobart Izaak Walton League began to clear ground for a clubhouse near its fish hatchery on Lake George.

In July, Hobart citizens welcomed back the American Legion carnival, the first since the war. The carnival was held on Front Street between Main and Center, in front of American Legion headquarters (now the Norge Laundry Village).

After 20 years in Hobart, Father Roederer of St. Bridget transferred to St. John and Rev. Alexander George replaced W.L. Thornton at the Assembly of God. Hobart librarian Bess Banks MacGillvray, who had been on leave for a year, officially resigned and was replaced by Lois Shroll.

Fun in the Sand

Doubts about opening the Hobart Beach for the season seemed an annual event, but

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Alvina Killigrew shops at Stommel's in 1957. Note the stools at the counter, where shoppers could rest while sales clerks waited on them. (Photo courtesy Hobart Historical Society).



Stommel's manager, Carl Krause, shown here in 1957 with two young customers. Yard goods and merchandise are stacked on shelves behind the counter. (Photo courtesy Hobart Historical Society)

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open the beach did, at least unofficially. Swimming was disrupted, however, it was reported to the City Council, by horseback riders who like to ride to the beach and allow their trusty steeds to roll in the sand and wade into the water. These shenanigans were quickly banned, and the beach was restored to the sole use of two-legged swimmers.